

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy without elected representative institutions or political parties. In preparation for winter municipal elections, however, the Government began voter and candidate registration in November. The Government's human rights record remained poor; although there were improvements in a few areas, serious problems remained. Security forces continued to abuse detainees and prisoners, arbitrarily arrest and detain persons, and detain them incommunicado. Mutawwa'in (religious police) continued to intimidate, abuse and detain citizens and foreigners with impunity. Most trials were closed, and defendants usually had no legal counsel.

Increased press freedom continued, with open discussion of previously taboo subjects such as women's rights, political and economic reform, Mutawwa'in abuses, government corruption and some religious issues. The Government continued to hold meetings of the National Dialogue to address issues of political reform, religious tolerance and the role of women and youth in the country. Despite these developments, the Government routinely infringed upon privacy rights and continued to place some restrictions on freedom of speech and press. The Government restricted freedom of assembly, association, religion and movement. Violence against women and children, discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities and strict limitations on workers rights continued.

A newly registered human rights non-governmental organization (NGO) began to address human rights violations, such as prison conditions. Numerous foreign journalists were issued visas and permitted to travel and report freely within the country. Journalists, however, were limited in their ability to criticize the religious police and question certain religious dogma. In October, the Government issued a law permitting long-term residents to apply for citizenship; as many as one million persons may be eligible for this program.

The United States continued to address democracy and human rights concerns in Saudi Arabia by urging the Government to increase political participation, transparency and accountability in government, rights for women, religious freedom and workers rights.

The United States continued to raise concerns about human rights at all levels of government, including in the Ambassador's meetings with senior government officials. United States officials highlight the need to improve human rights conditions, urging the Government to promote greater religious tolerance and support ongoing reform efforts. The Embassy raised these concerns directly with the Government whenever human rights violations occurred and met with representatives from the National Human Rights Association.

The United States encouraged and promoted press freedom in a number of ways. During , two Saudi reporters were invited to the United States on Foreign Press Center programs on elections and on Arab-American and other minority communities. The Embassy facilitated contacts with American officials for several other Saudi reporters traveling privately, including a respected social affairs columnist who comments regularly on human rights issues.

Due to security concerns in Saudi Arabia, the Embassy was unable to conduct any formal training in journalism and again had to suspend or postpone a number of other planned programs. Through the International Visitors Program (IVP) and related programs, however, the United States sponsored individuals to go to U.S. seminars on key topics including multiculturalism in a democratic society; women as leaders in the private and public sectors; the role of youth effecting social, political and economic change; and student leaders and civic responsibility. In Riyadh and Jeddah, a series of roundtable discussions, film showings and telephone press conferences about the general election in the United States provided opportunities to discuss political freedoms with Saudi community leaders as well as journalists. In the third year of an important Saudi-specific initiative, ten educators participated in a special program on religious education in the United States, designed, among other things, to illustrate America's religious tolerance and diversity. American recipients of Fulbright scholarships were unable to come to Saudi Arabia because of security concerns, but Fulbright and IVP scholars from Saudi Arabia continued programs in the United States.

Representatives from the Government and private sector in Saudi Arabia participated in several Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) regional programs, including a workshop on media policy held in Abu Dhabi in October. A half-dozen young Saudi students attended MEPI-funded American studies programs that featured discussions of human rights. The United States provided International Military Education and Training Assistance for the Saudi military, which increased awareness of international norms of human

rights and fostered greater respect for the principle of civilian control of the military and the rule of law. In compliance with the Leahy amendment, the Defense Attaché's Office worked closely with the Minister of Defense to vet military units for U.S. training and checked candidates with other embassy officers.

The Secretary of State added Saudi Arabia to its list of Countries of Particular Concern for severe violations of religious freedom. The United States encouraged Saudi officials to honor the Government's public commitment to permit and protect private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against religious minorities, and promote tolerance towards non-Muslims and Muslims who do not adhere to the official Salafist tradition of Islam. United States officials also continued to press the connection between religious intolerance and terrorism, with the Ambassador and Embassy officials continuing their call for increased respect for freedom of religion and tolerance of people of all faiths. The Ambassador protested raids on private homes and the detention of Christian worshippers, calling on the Government to respect its publicly stated guarantee to protect non-Muslims' right to practice their faith in private. In addition, the United States sponsored the participation of Saudi Islamic educators and scholars in U.S. programs on religious life in America.

As noted in the Trafficking in Persons Report, the Government does not have an anti-trafficking law per se despite criminalization of most forms of trafficking under existing statutes. Domestic laborers were not protected under the country's labor law. The majority of cases involving trafficking were settled out of court by mediation and settlements.

To address U.S. concerns about such abuses, the Saudi Government began informational outreach to foreign workers this year, providing guidance on basic rights and legal resources against abuse both when the employee receives a visa to travel to Saudi Arabia and upon his/her arrival. The United States also urged the Government to promote public awareness regarding the treatment of domestic servants and continues to take steps to do so. The United States also encouraged NGO and private involvement and increasing public affairs efforts by the Government to highlight the dangers and vulnerabilities of trafficking in persons. Finally, the United States discussed long-term improvements in the status and legal rights of foreign laborers under Saudi labor law. Through engagement with Saudi officials, the Embassy has advocated better protection for foreign workers under the law and encouraged the investigation and prosecution of traffickers.

During the year, the Government acknowledged trafficking problems related to abuse of domestic servants, especially female expatriate workers. The press carried a number of stories on the abuse of maids and other domestic workers, including the prosecution and punishment of citizen employers who abused domestic employees.

The Government operated shelters in the three largest cities for abused female workers, including some trafficking victims, and in Dammam established a Social Welfare office to take complaints from foreign workers. Trafficking victims, however, faced disincentives to seek the prosecution of their employer for trafficking and were required first to file a police report before going to a government shelter if they were party to a criminal complaint. The Government worked with several Islamic charities to provide long term care for abandoned children, including those who were trafficked and forced into begging. During the year, the authorities disrupted a cross-border (Yemen-Saudi Arabia) child smuggling ring; and the Governments of Saudi Arabia and Yemen have formed a joint committee to address the problem. Authorities also arrested a man on charges of smuggling maids into Jeddah to work for a brothel, the first documented case of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the country.